

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6220

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MOSCOW 0609

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, UR, US

SUBJECT: BREZHNEV AND SOVIET POLITICAL SUCCESSION

1. MASSIVE CURRENT SPECULATION IN MOSCOW AND IN WESTERN PRESS ON BREZHNEV'S POLITICAL STANDING PROMPTS US TO OFFER OUR VIEWS ON POSSIBLE ROUTES TO BE FOLLOWED WHEN EVENTUAL POLITICAL SUCCESSION OCCURS. CHIEF MYSTERY NOW IS NATURE AND SEVERITY OF BREZHNEV'S ILLNESS. WE UNDERSTAND AUSTRALIANS ARE HOPING FOR A MEETING BETWEEN WHITLAM AND BREZHNEV ON JANUARY 16. IT WOULD PRESUMABLY BE IN THE SOVIET INTEREST TO ARRANGE A MEETING, IF ONLY A BRIEF ONE, AND TO PUBLICIZE IT WITH PHOTOGRAPHS IN ORDER TO STOP THE GROUNDSWELL OF RUMORS IN MOSCOW AND IN THE WESTERN PRESS. A NONAPPEARANCE WOULD ADD FRESH FUEL TO RUMORS WHICH HAVE INCREASED STEADILY SINCE EGYPTIAN PRESS AND SOME SOVIETS PLAYED ILLNESS STORY AS COVERUP FOR POLICY CONFLICTS WITH EGYPT.

2. WE CAN ADD LITTLE HARD INFORMATION ON BREZHNEV'S ALLEGED ILLNESS BEYOND WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN IN WASHINGTON. JANUARY 8 APPEARANCE AT HIS MOTHER'S FUNERAL MIGHT HAVE SQUASHED THESE RUMORS, BUT NO PHOTOGRAPH OF BREZHNEV APPEARED AND NO WESTERNER ACTUALLY SAW BREZHNEV AT THE CEREMONEIS. WE DO KNOW THAT BREZHNEV'S LIMOUSINE ARRIVED AT DOM UCHENYKH ON JANUARY 8 AND THAT SECURITY OFFICER ON THE SPOT ASSERTED THAT
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BREZHNEV HAD INDEED GONE INSIDE FOR HIS MOTHER'S LAST

rites.

3. MOSCOVITES NOW CIRCULATING VARIOUS RUMORS OF ILLNESS RANGING FROM STROKE TO RESPIRATORY ILLNESS. THERE HAS ALSO BEEN SOME TALK OF LEUKEMIA, BUT WE THINK THIS IS MORE LIKELY PLAYBACK FROM THE CHARLES BARTLETT STORY, AS BROADCAST BY WESTERN RADIO, RATHER THAN ANY INSIDE INFORMATION. IN ADDITION, LOWER-RANKING PARTY OFFICIALS HAVE TOLD AMERICAN NEWSMEN OF NERVOUSNESS IN PARTY CIRCLES AND WIDESPREAD FEAR THAT FIRST STEPS IN POLITICAL MANEUVERING FOR SUCCESSION ARE ALREADY UNDERWAY. HIGH-LEVEL OF PUBLIC ADULATION FOR BREZHNEV IS NOW EVIDENTLY BEING REINTERPRETED BY SOME SOVIETS AS INDICATION OF MANEUVERING AND ALSO SMOKESCREEN FOR REAL ATTITUDES OF POLITICAL LEADERS.

4. DESPITE THESE RUMORS, WE WOULD STRESS THAT THERE HAVE BEEN NO OUTWARD INDICATORS OF LEADERSHIP STRUGGLE OR OF DROP IN BREZHNEV'S STANDING. IN FACT, PUBLIC INDICATORS OF BREZHNEV'S STATUS HAVE BEEN NORMAL. AS IS CUSTOM DURING PERIOD BETWEEN APPEARANCES, BREZHNEV'S NAME HAS BEEN KEPT BEFORE READERS BY PUBLISHING SIGNED LETTERS TO WORKERS, INSTITUTIONS, ETC. REFERENCES TO BREZHNEV AT POLITICAL MEETINGS CONTINUE TO FOLLOW USUAL FORMAT AND CURRENT FORMULA OF "POLITBURO HEADED BY BREZHNEV" STILL APPEARING. IN BRIEF, SOVIET MEDIA ARE BEHAVING AS IF NOTHING WERE AMISS. FURTHERMORE, BREZHNEV CONTINUES TO BE CITED AND QUOTED BY NAME BY OTHER LEADERS, LATEST INSTANCE OF WHICH WAS KOSYGIN'S SPEECH AT FESTIVITIES HONORING WHITLAM JANUARY 14.

5. WESTERN PRESS NOW SPECULATING INTENSELY ON ALLEGED POLICY SETBACKS FOR BREZHNEV IN DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN AREAS. WHILE IT IS DIFFICULT TO GAUGE SEVERITY OF DOMESTIC DIFFICULTIES, IT IS TRUE THAT 1974 HAS SEEN LITTLE PROGRESS TOWARD BREZHNEV'S PROPOSALS FOR REORGANIZATION OF ECONOMIC AND AGRICULTURE ADMINISTRATION PUT FORWARD A YEAR AGO. THE DRAFT FOURTH CONSTITUTION HAS MOVED BACK INTO THE SHADOWS AFTER SOME PUBLICITY

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BY BREZHNEV IN 1972 AND INTERMITTENT HINTS BY LEGAL WRITERS SINCE THEN. IMPACT OF SOVIET REJECTION OF MFN ON BREZHNEV PERSONALLY IS STILL TOO EARLY TO DETERMINE WITH ANY CONFIDENCE. SOVIET MIDDLE EAST POLICY IS CLEARLY EXPERIENCING SETBACKS, BUT IT IS DOUBTFUL WHETHER THIS HAS GENERATED SIGNIFICANT DISSATISFACTION WITH BREZHNEV LEADERSHIP ON PART OF HIS CENTRAL COMMITTEE AND POLITBURO COLLEAGUES.

6. OVERRIDING THE ABOVE, IN OUR VIEW, IS FACT THAT 1974 WAS A GOOD YEAR IN INDUSTRY AND AGRICULTURE, PARTICULARLY IN COMPARISON TO WIDESPREAD SLUMP IN ALL WESTERN INDUSTRIALIZED SOCIETIES. NO UNSETTLING PURGES OF POLITICAL CADRES OR INSTITUTIONS ARE UNDERWAY. THE SOVIET CONSUMER HAS FARED COMPARATIVELY WELL AND IS NOT FACING PROLONGED SHORTAGES OR UNUSUAL HARDSHIPS. THE LEVEL OF PERSONAL DISSATISFACTION IS NOT UNSUAL. THE ADOPTION OF A NEW INTERNAL PASSPORT SIGNIFIES CONTINUED CONFIDENCE BY THE REGIME IN ITS DOMESTIC SECURITY MACHINERY AND A WILLINGNESS TO LIBERALIZE SOME CONTROLS OVER ITS POPULATION. CONTINUING STATEMENTS ON THE IMPENDING 25TH PARTY CONGRESS (STILL SCHEDULED FOR FIRST QUARTER OF 1976) POINT TOWARD ONLY MINOR POLITICAL MOVEMENT AT LOWER ECHELONS.

7. AT THE SAME TIME, NEXT PARTY CONGRESS OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOVIETS IN ARRANGING ORDERLY POLITICAL SUCCESSION. IF BREZHNEV IS INCAPACITATED BY ILLINES IN NEAR FUTURE, WE FEEL THAT SOVIETS WOULD LIKELY ADOPT PREVIOUS MECHANISM OF SENIOR COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP WHICH WOULD FUNCTION UNTIL NEW LEADER EMERGES. BUT IF BREZHENV PULLS THROUGH CURRENT ILLNESS IN GOOD SHAPE, HE WILL BE IN POSITION TO MANIPULATE PERSONNEL SHUFFLES BEFORE THE CONGRESS AND TO ANOINT AN HEIR DESIGNATE, THUS HOPEFULLY ACCOMPLISHING THE FIRST ORDERLY TRANSFER OF POWER IN SOVIET HISTORY.

8. ASSUMING THAT BREZHNEV IS REMOVED FROM THE LEADERSHIP IN THE NEAR FUTURE BECAUSE OF HEALTH REASONS, A QUADRUNVIRATE CONSISTING OF PODGORNYY, KOSYGIN, SUSLOV, CONFIDENTIAL

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AND KIRILENKO MIGHT FUNCTION FOR A COMPARATIVELY SHORT PERIOD WITH KIRILENKO IN THE BEST POSITION TO PICK UP THE LEADER'S MANTLE. HOWEVER, HIS 68 YEARS IMPLY THAT HE WOULD NOT RETAIN HIS POSITION FOR MANY YEARS. HE MIGHT SOON FIND HIMSELF FORCED OUT BY ONE OR PERHAPS A COMBINATION OF SEVERAL OF HIS COLLEAGUES FROM AMONG THE YOUNGER COTERIE.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 MOSCOW 0609

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9. IF BREZHNEV SURVIVES HIS PRESENT ILLNESS AND CARRIES ON THROUGH THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS, HE MIGHT WELL BE TEMPTED TO GIVE WAY TO HIS AGE AND INFIRMITIES AND RETIRE GRACEFULLY. IN SUCH A SITUATION OUR GUESS IS THAT BREZHNEV WOULD WANT TO SELECT A SUCCESSOR WHO WOULD BE IN A POSITION TO CARRY FORWARD HIS POLICIES FOR AT LEAST A DECADE. THIS WOULD APPEAR TO RULE OUT KIRILENKO AS BREZHNEV'S CHOICE FOR FIRST SECRETARY, SINCE HE IS SLIGHTLY OLDER THAN BREZHNEV AND WOULD NOT BE AROUND LONG ENOUGH TO IMPLEMENT LONG-TERM POLICIES. IT IS MORE LIKELY THAT BREZHNEV WOULD USE HIS REMAINING TIME IN POWER TO GROOM A YOUNGER MAN FOR THE TOP JOB. THE NAMES OF KULAKOV AND SCHCHERBITSKIY COME TO MIND BECAUSE OF THEIR AGE -- BOTH ARE 56 -- AND THEIR PAST CLOSE ASSOCIATION WITH BREZHNEV. HOWEVER, LIKE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE TOP LEADERSHIP THEY HAVE SERIOUS POSSIBLE SHORTCOMINGS. KULAKOV, WHO WOULD SEEM TO BE THE ONLY CURRENT PARTY SECRETARY TO HAVE A REAL CHANCE FOR THE TOP JOB, LACKS NATIONAL LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES OTHER THAN IN AGRICULTURE, AND HE HAS BEEN ABSENT FOR LONG PERIODS WHICH IMPLIES A HEALTH PROBLEM WHICH MIGHT RULE HIM OUT OF CONSIDERATION. SCHCHERBITSKIY, WHO IS PERSONABLE AND ENERGETIC, ENJOYS A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP OF LONG DURATION WITH BREZHNEV AND EVIDENTLY IS A DEPENDABLE ALLY, BUT HE HAS BEEN LIMITED TO THE UKRAINE SO FAR. BREZHNEV WOULD PROBABLY HAVE TO PUT HIM INTO A NATIONAL LEADERSHIP POST IN MOSCOW BEFORE HE COULD ASPIRE TO THE TOP PARTY JOB.

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10. THERE ARE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE PRESENT POLITBURO

AND SECRETARIAT WITH AMBITIONS WHO ARE IN THE RIGHT AGE BRACKET, BUT IN MOST CASES THEY APPEAR UNLIKELY CANDIDATES FOR THE TOP PARTY POST. SHELEPIN AND POLYANSKIY ARE POSSIBLY THE MOST AMBITIOUS, BUT BOTH HAVE SUFFERED SEVERE DEMOTIONS AND THEIR REMAINING POLITICAL STRENGTH IS PROBLEMATIC, ESPECIALLY FOR SHELEPIN WHOSE FORMER POLICE STRONGHOLD HAVE BEEN TAKEN OVER BY BREZHNEV'S FRIENDS. MAZUROV IS REGARDED AS A MORE LIKELY REPLACEMENT FOR KOSYGIN -- WHO WOULD PROBABLY LEAVE THE SCENE ALONG WITH BREZHNEV -- THAN ANYBODY ELSE. THE KAZAKH LEADER KUNAYEV PROBABLY STANDS NO CHANCE AT ALL OF GAINING TOP POWER, AS IS ALSO TRUE OF PELSHE. GRECHKO AND GROMYKO CAN ALSO BE DISREGARDED AS CANDIDATES FOR THE GENERAL SECRETARYSHIP. KGB CHIEF ANDROPOV HAS BEEN TOUTED IN THE WESTERN PRESS AS A CANDIDATE FOR THE TOP POST, BUT THE ARGUMENTS SOUND UNCONVINCING TO US. ANDROPOV IS NOT A PROFESSIONAL KGB OFFICER BUT A PARTY MAN WHO HAS SERVED LARGELY IN THE AREA OF SOVIET-EAST EUROPEAN RELATIONS. HIS PROFESSIONAL TIES HAVE BEEN CLOSEST TO SUSLOV, BUT HIS DOMESTIC BASE AND EXPERIENCE DO NOT SEEM ADEQUATE FOR THE NUMBER ONE POST.

11. AMONG CANDIDATE MEMBERS OF THE POLITBURO, THE LENINGRAD PARTY BOSS, G. V. ROMANOV, APPEARS TO HAVE THE CAPABILITY OF BECOMING A MORE IMPORTANT MAN AND COULD POSSIBLY ACHIEVE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP STATUS. HE COULD BECOME AN ATTRACTIVE FUTURE COMPROMISE CANDIDATE IF A DEADLOCK DEVELOPED IN MOSCOW. SOLOMENTSEV PROBABLY COULD FUNCTION ON A HIGHER LEVEL THAN HIS PRESENT POST AS CHAIRMAN OF THE RSFSR COUNCIL OF MINISTERS, BUT HIS HARD-LINE VIEWS AND RIGID PERSONALITY WOULD NOT MAKE HIM AN ATTRACTIVE FIGURE FOR HANDLING FOREIGN AFFAIRS.

12. KATUSHEV APPEARS TO BE THE MOST LIKELY PROSPECT OF THE THREE CENTRAL COMMITTEE SECRETARIES, WHO ARE NOT MEMBERS OR CANDIDATE MEMBERS OF THE POLITBURO, AND HE MIGHT ASPIRE TO HIGHER RANK IN THE FUTURE. BUT HIS RELATIVE CONFIDENTIAL

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YOUTH MILITATES AGAINST HIM AND HIS PRESENT SPECIALTY AS SUPERVISOR OF BLOC PARTY LIAISON IS AS YET TOO NARROW TO SERVE AS A SPRINGBOARD TO THE TOP LEADERSHIP. IVAN KAPITONOV IS IN THE RIGHT AGE BRACKET AT 59, BUT APPEARS TO LACK OTHER QUALITIES NECESSARY TO REACH THE TOP LEVEL.

13. THE POLITBURO ALWAYS CONTINUES ITSELF THROUGH CO-OPTATION. THE PAST PATTERN HAS BEEN TO CHOOSE AMONG

THOSE ALREADY AT OR NEAR THE TOP OF THE POLITICAL PYRAMID. FOR THIS REASON, UNKNOWNNS AND DARK HORSES CAN THUS FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES BE IGNORED IN ASSESSMENTS OF THE FUTURE SOVIET POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE NEAR TERM.

14. MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE NAME OF THE NEW LEADER IS THE QUESTION OF WHETHER OR NOT A CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP WOULD EVOKE SHARP ALTERATIONS IN SOVIET POLICY TOWARD THE WEST DURING A TRANSITION PERIOD. THIS IS, OF COURSE, IMPOSSIBLE TO ANSWER WITH ANY CERTAINTY. HOWEVER, PAST EXPERIENCE SUGGESTS THAT THE LEADERSHIP TRADITIONALLY FALLS BACK TO CAUTIOUS AND SECURE POSITIONS WHEN UNDERGOING POLITICAL CRISES OR TRANSITION AND AVOIDS "ADVENTURISM," WHICH MIGHT BE DANGEROUS FOR AN INSECURE LEADER. THE POSSIBILITY THAT AMERICAN-SOVIET RELATIONS WILL BECOME A POLITICAL FOOTBALL DURING PERIODS OF INTERNAL JOCKEYING CANNOT BE RULED OUT, BUT IF PAST PRACTICE IS ANY GUIDE IT IS FAR MORE LIKELY THAT INTERNAL ECONOMIC ISSUES WILL BE THE FOCUS OF THOSE POLICY DISPUTES WHICH A LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION CRISIS WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY GENERATE. IN ANY CASE, WE HAVE THUS FAR BEEN UNABLE TO IDENTIFY ANY SIGNIFICANT SOVIET LEADERS WHO CAN BE CLEARLY LABELED AS BEING OPPOSED TO THE POLICY OF DETENTE AS PUT FORWARD BY BREZNEV.
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